CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 84 *CutBank 84*

Article 16

Spring 2016

Wilderness

Katherine E. Standefer

Katherine E. Standefer

Wilderness

For my sister

Out on the plateaus, it was winter. If you had slept, you woke with your tarp blown halfway off, its plastic heaped with snow. To build a shelter, you had been told, was a privilege. Something to be earned. So in those early days you curled into the tarp like a burrito. The heated water bottle, wedged into your canvas sleeping bag, cooled within minutes, and you spent nights quivering, packed into every piece of clothing they gave you. You cried, although you hoped no one could hear.

No one told you where you were. That was against the point. That would help you to run. You weren't a runner, not really, but they had to assume if town was nearby you'd slip out in the middle of the night, follow a road in, beg a ride somewhere. Disappear. For this reason, they took your shoes at night, and sometimes you peed sock-footed in the early morning, squatting in the snow. During the day when you went to the bathroom you counted out loud, *three, four, five,* so they could tell you weren't running, or throwing up if you were one of the bulimics. (You weren't.) When the group fanned out to collect firewood, you all counted together, each of you hollering your assigned number in turns. If you took too long, they'd come after you.

The plateaus were quiet, empty. Your group ran into no one. Your group trudged uphill through the mud. At gear issuing, the closest boot size they'd had was a 10. You were an eight and a half. So your feet hurt.

You knew, at least, that you'd begun in Roosevelt, Utah. The escorts had dropped you on a farm in late October, after the flight from Atlanta to Salt Lake City, after the drive south and east to where the land flattened and browned. It was never clear why you were on the farm, except maybe that they knew more students were coming and this was the easiest way to integrate them, before you went out onto the plateaus. During these days, you did things like dig pits, tear down sheds, feed the horses and the chickens. The memories are splotchy. What you do remember is that there

was one bed in the boys' room and one bed in the girls' room, and once you all rotated, those nights, each of you got to sleep in a bed once. You remember they'd taken down the shower rod and curtain in the bathroom so no one could hang themselves. During your one shower you had to leave the door wide open and count. You were last. The water was cold and it went everywhere, and there was no shampoo or conditioner. But it was a shower. In the living room, you weren't allowed to sit on the couches or use the coffee table. After all, you were at Wilderness.

There were lots of reasons a person ended up at Wilderness, but they could be summed up like this: you weren't doing what you were told. This started forever ago. In the suburbs. You saw your first therapist in fifth grade. You didn't know why you had so much rage. You just did. You talked back to teachers you hated. You got caught shoplifting. You told your friends you'd been raped, that you were pregnant, that you had cancer, and these things fit the kind of darkness inside you even though they weren't true. You hated that there were all these darknesses and no good reason for them. You knew you weren't really a bad person. You screamed at our parents. You cut yourself.

When our parents sent you away your junior year of high school, after you'd started with the pot and the club drugs and the disappearing, it was to the boarding school in Georgia, where strangers controlled every part of your life. They strip-searched you. You had to bend over to make sure nothing fell out of your vulva. You were put in a Peer Group and given Writing Assignments. You were supposed to Tell Your Story to two people per week, and get signed off. When you didn't do what you were told, you ended up on Restriction.

On Restriction, you lived away from the General Population. You ate ham and white bread sandwiches two meals a day, although sometimes the anorexics snuck you their cheese. You ate bruised apples and slept on the tile floor in the hall under the fluorescent lights, near the night guard. The other kids there had stolen cars, blown out their nasal passages with co-

caine, committed armed robbery. You didn't belong here, you thought. Your story was made-up. But you got caught smoking or refused your therapy challenges, and so you were on Restriction a lot. There was a tipping point. You got sent to Wilderness.

On your first night on the plateaus, you were told to make a spoon if you wanted one. They showed you how to press a hot ember into a flat piece of wood until a divot blackened. You made a bowl this way too. There were no pots and pans.

There were tricks: if you got the Spam on a rock by the fire just right, it tasted like bacon. And the canned peaches: warmed in the fire and covered in graham cracker crumbles, you could make a kind of cobbler. It would almost taste good.

You all learned to make fire. The bowdrill. You kneeled in the mud and worked the sticks against each other, breathing carefully on the embers. If the designated firestarter for the day didn't get the tinder to light, no one would get to cook. Then one day Ramsay found matches, and socked them away. After that, on the nights someone had trouble with fire, he would go over to "help," and suddenly the blaze would go up. This was the end of the cold-food nights.

Ramsay was from your school too. You didn't know he was coming. In the first days of Wilderness, back at the farm, you'd seen him walking up the path to the house and you'd gone running toward him, crying, embracing him. "Ramsay!" you said. "I'm so glad it's you."

The counselors pulled you off, as this was not allowed.

In the mornings on the plateaus, you spread the campfire ash. You were told to put it in pits at the bases of the junipers. Then you piled all your gear onto your tarp: the five-gallon water jug you carried on your back at all times. The worthless sleeping bag. The extra sports bra and four pairs of underwear and one pair of thermals and two black t-shirts and four pairs of wool socks you weren't currently wearing. Your spoon and bowl. Around

you, everyone wore matching army fatigue pants and hoodies and bandannas. You all wrapped the gear in your tarp with your piece of rope. You used an old seatbelt-style strap to fix the pack onto yourself. You got better at this every day.

If you wanted to speak, you had to say "Excuse me" first.

Most days you walked eight miles, some ten, occasionally three, in your big shifty boots. You could see that this might be a beautiful place, if your boots fit. If it was June or September instead of November. If you had a better sleeping bag and had chosen to come. Some afternoons the light slanted down to the west and everything got golden. The scraggly pinon pines. The broad brown canyons. Everyone in the group was tan. Your body had become taut with muscle. These days the sun would flare before it went down, the sky turning an aching red, and maybe you got to talk and laugh with someone while the fire got going. You could see that after this place, you would be a person who knew how to do some things, like light a bow-drill fire and make a pack and shit off a log.

But other days you got your period and you had to burn the waste in the cooking campfire in front of everyone. The sopping tampons would sit heavy on the logs, smoking, spreading blood for a long time before they finally caught fire and smouldered away. And you smouldered too.

It was somewhere in those cold weeks that it happened to you, at last. After you'd spent those nights sobbing and shaking, scared, breathing on your numb hands and looking up at the endless stars. After you'd curled up against the gusting icy wind. The trees on the plateau shook. Snowflakes swirled onto your forehead. You were so far from everyone. You were so far from where you'd begun.

You'd said they'd never break you. That no one could break you.

But you began to beg them to send you back to your dumb school. You'd do the work, you said. You'd do all the levels in a few days. You'd do anything.

You saw how they shook their heads at you, how they left you with

your five-gallon water jug and a tarp to roll. You saw how when John Paul sat on the trail and refused to move, nothing got done. And you and the others were the ones pleading with him. "Just get up," you said. "Let's just get to camp so we can start the fire."

And suddenly you knew the word. Surrender. You would have to.

When they finally took you off the mountain, it was Thanksgiving. Your last night on the plateaus they brought you cans of yams and cranberries that you put in the fire. The group passed the cans around, hot, and everyone took spoonfuls. Your friends filled your journal with their addresses, though when the counselors packed up your things you would never get the journal back.

Faye was the one who drove you out, and on the way to the farm she stopped at a house, went into the fridge to get leftovers, and collected someone's razor and shaving cream. At the ranch, you took your first real shower in a month. You hair was dreadlocks by then. You used someone else's razor and ate someone else's leftovers.

That night, waiting for your ride to the airport, you sat on the big brown couch for the first time. You'd earned the right.